Title: Jeff Davis's Own: Cavalry, Comanches, and the Battle for the Texas Frontier
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1

"Jeff Davis's Own"

The duty of repressing hostilities among the Indian tribes, and of protecting frontier settlements from their depredations, is the most difficult one which the Army has now to perform; and no where has it been found more difficult than on the Western frontier of Texas.

—Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, 1853 (in Davis to Bell, September 19, 1853, in Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Letters, Papers, and Speeches,* vol. 2)

TEXAS. Unimaginably vast. More than six times the size of Ohio, about three times the size of Great Britain, larger than France. Only recently ascended to the constellation of state stars that appeared on the national flag, much of this outsized territory was little known to white men. Bold and enterprising army officers had tried to measure Texas's ill-defined frontier and concluded that it stretched some 1,400 to 1,700 miles. To defend this frontier against Indian attack and to fight the Indians elsewhere, in 1855 Congress resolved to raise two new regiments of cavalry. For army officers facing stalled careers (the overwhelming majority in the small regular army of the 1850s), the new regiments presented a priceless opportunity for promotion. Throughout the nation they anxiously waited for a message from the War Department. Only a select handful received the coveted missive.

Their wait was merely one more challenge from an organization that seemed to delight in thwarting ambition. Indeed, the antebellum United States Army tested a man's character, revealing much. Most officers served in small frontier garrisons, where boredom and isolation reigned supreme. Their duties seldom provided zealous officers with an avenue for either intellectual or military betterment. Some became indolent, others fell to drink. Prospects for promotion were so poor—a West Point graduate could anticipate a wait of more than fifty years before becoming a colonel—that many gifted leaders resigned to pursue alternatives. The entire army had only two major generals and four brigadiers. A suspicious, parsimonious Congress established a rule of law that provided that no vacancies be filled until this number fell to one major general and two brigadiers. So men of talent, and those who believed they possessed talent, waited until either death or rare chance gave them an opportunity to ascend the lofty heights where one wore a colonel's or a general's insignia. Meanwhile, West Point cadets and graduates alike sang the old drinking song, "May the army be augmented—may promotion be less slow," and they sang it with feeling.[1] In spite of it all, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Edward Lee had stuck with it. Yet he, too, had been unable to capitalize upon his sterling reputation, a reputation gained during the glory times of the war against Mexico.

In 1847, just eight years before Congress issued the call for the new regiments, Captain Lee had served as the principal prop upon which General Winfield Scott had leaned as he plotted his advance to Mexico City. It was Lee who found a way to outflank the Mexican fortifications on the Acapulco Road, and Lee who had guided the assault column against Chapultepec. It was Lee who opened the door to the Halls of Montezuma. He had received promotion to brevet lieutenant colonel. Yet the brevet rank was largely honorific, and it could not and did not substitute for a true promotion.[2] Moreover, a man could remain at a brevet

rank year after year, and so it proved for Lee. He stayed a brevet lieutenant colonel, his glory years seemingly behind him, growing older, stagnating, and failing to see any alternative.

The long hoped for message from the War Department found him at West Point, where he was immersed in his duties as superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy. It contained an appointment to the Second U.S. Cavalry. Despite all of its coveted promise, the appointment was a mixed blessing. On the one hand it offered promotion, which otherwise would be problematic. But he was already drawing pay as a colonel by brevet and he enjoyed his service at West Point. Cavalry service would require living on the frontier. It also involved a transfer from his beloved engineering service. Lee had thoroughly mastered the scientific details required of an army engineer and enjoyed a national reputation. To switch to the cavalry required, if not a leap into the unknown, then a step into unfamiliar duty because he had not studied cavalry tactics since his days as a cadet at West Point, twenty-six years earlier. In the end, he had little choice. Lee placed a high value on duty. He was also ambitious. To decline would mean permanent removal from the promotion ladder. So he abandoned the comforts of West Point and set out for regimental headquarters at Louisville, Kentucky.

In contrast, when a War Department message addressed to Brevet Second Lieutenant John Bell Hood reached Fort Jones, California, the young officer received it without equivocation. Brevet second lieutenants were a dime a dozen; the rank was a reward for surviving West Point. Hood was one of too many graduates for whom there was no permanent position. Moreover, Hood had found duty in California, "this country of gold and extravagance," expensive on a salary of $60 a month.[3] True, to make ends meet and perhaps do a bit better, he had recently invested in land on which to sow a large crop of wheat. His experienced eye—at age fifteen he had managed his father's

farm—anticipated that this effort would yield a fine profit in the inflated northern California market. But an appointment as second lieutenant in the Second Cavalry might illuminate his military rather than his agricultural skills, so he accepted without reservation. He trusted that his new friend and business partner, Lieutenant George Crook, could manage the harvest. After Lieutenant Philip Sheridan relieved him at Fort Jones, Hood began his return east by riding to San Francisco. Here he secured funds for his travels at the Lucas, Turner & Company bank, run by a former military man with a "piercing eye and nervous impulsive temperament," William Tecumseh Sherman. Then he set sail for New York City en route to report for duty at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri.[4] There he would receive his portion of the profits for his wheat investment, a neat $1,000 in gold.

In Texas, a young, troubled man named Charles E. Travis greeted his appointment to the cavalry with joy. Within the state, he possessed unsurpassed public recognition because he was the living embodiment of Texas's greatest legend. Charles Travis's father was the Travis of Alamo fame. Side by side with Crockett, Bowie, and the others, his father had fought a sacrificial battle to secure liberty. Charles Travis had not quite lived up to his big name. He reckoned that serving as a captain in the Second Cavalry would help him see his way toward solid achievement and renown commensurate with his birthright.

WHEN LEE, HOOD, AND TRAVIS entered the cavalry, it was a branch of the service that held an undistinguished tradition within the U.S. Army. During the American Revolution, the Continental Congress had authorized the formation of four dragoon regiments. In theory a dragoon trooper was equally capable of fighting on horse and on foot. In practice some unhappy form of compromise usually arose. Equipment suitable for mounted

combat—stiff riding boots and sabers, to name two examples—made dismounted movement awkward. Training for a horse soldier sought to persuade him that no opposing line of infantry could withstand a determined cavalry charge. If this was somewhat short of the truth, it did at least instill the requisite dash and élan. Had dragoon training ended there it probably would have produced a serviceable cavalryman. But then the dragoon received infantry training, which naturally taught that a heart-of-oak line of footmen could repel any mounted attack. So, while the confused dragoon learned that he was neither fish nor fowl, he was made keenly aware of the perils associated with both mounted and dismounted combat.

Except in the southern theater late in the war, the Continental dragoons contributed little to the American war effort. In passing it is well to note that among the Continental army's mounted units was a highly capable outfit commanded by Major Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, Robert's father. The Continental Congress quickly mastered the fact that maintaining a cavalry regiment was considerably more expensive than maintaining one of infantry. Troopers required special equipment such as saddles and bridles, and none of it came cheap. The purchase of suitable horses was more expensive, and worse, the equines displayed a shocking proclivity toward disabling disease and even death while not on campaign, and an inability to dodge bullets and cannonballs while in battle. The shrewd economists in Congress also observed that horses ate more than lowly foot soldiers. So to save money, until 1833 mounted units were typically recruited only in response to emergencies, and then disbanded as soon as possible.

By that year the United States was confronting an ongoing emergency against a numerous mounted foe against whom infantry could accomplish little. The Indians of the Great Plains were unsurpassed horsemen, akin to irregular light cavalry, who specialized in hit-and-run raids. To cope with them Congress

authorized the First Regiment of Dragoons. A Second Dragoon Regiment followed three years later, its colonel a David E. Twiggs, who would later be district commander when the Second Cavalry went to Texas. The war with Mexico produced the Third Dragoons as well as the Mounted Rifles Regiment. Four regiments of cavalry were very few indeed for an army engaged in an invasion of Mexico and a defense of the sprawling territory west of the Mississippi. Victory over Mexico brought a heavier burden. The annexation of Texas and the settlement of the dispute with Great Britain over the Oregon Territory increased the nation's territory by two-thirds. In keeping with the lack of logic that has typified the political response to increased national responsibilities, Congress reduced the army to its lowest strength since 1838. However, since unfriendly Indians occupied most of the new territory, Congress did not disband the cavalry following the war with Mexico. Yet they were not enough to protect the white citizens who eagerly settled the new acquisitions or to guard the constant streams of wagon trains carrying emigrants to the California goldfields and to Oregon. Nowhere was this more true than in Texas.

The War Department based the defense of the Texas frontier upon a chain of forts. Scarcely had the chinking set between the forts' logs than settlers, in their lust for virgin country, moved past them. Located behind the expanding frontier, the weakly manned outposts neither kept Indian raiders from stabbing at Texans living on the frontier nor deterred them from continuing their habitual raids into Mexico. This latter behavior brought the Indian conflict into the realm of foreign policy. The war-ending agreement with Mexico, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, compelled the United States to keep its hostile Indians out of Mexico. The American negotiators who accepted this term were blithely unaware of the magnitude of the obligation they were imposing upon the army.

Neither had the Comanches, the Kiowas, and their fellow spirits been consulted about the treaty, and they cared not one whit for its terms. As soon as grass emerged in the spring, from as far away as the river Platte they rode to the staging area at the Big Springs of the Colorado. From here they rode south to collect horses, prisoners, scalps, and other desirable loot from hapless Mexicans. So much Indian traffic moved along these war trails that they appeared on period maps of the region. A Texas scout describes coming across them: "Twenty-five deep worn and much used trails made a great road, which told us that this was a highway by which each year the Comanche of the North desolate Durango and Chihuahua."[5] In the decade following the treaty, 652 Mexicans were killed, wounded, or captured in the state of Nuevo León alone. Raids were so ferocious that the settlement line in northern Mexico actually receded, leaving behind a ruined, empty region termed the Desert of the Frontier.

For a brief time in the early 1850s, federal and state troops began successfully interdicting the war trails to Mexico. Several chiefs complained to the Department of the Interior's Indian agents that the troops were preventing them from going to Mexico to obtain horses and mules "as they had always done."[6] The Comanches responded in the same way the North Vietnamese would respond to American efforts to interdict passage along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the 1960s; they made new trails, farther away from military bases. In Texas, these new invasion paths to the west and north helped prompt the government to construct a new line of frontier forts. When troops moved to western Texas to garrison these forts, the Comanches slid in behind the forts, returning to northern Texas to attack the exposed frontier. Even the area a long distance from the frontier, including ranches within twenty miles of Austin and in the region around San Antonio, became occasional targets. The army in Texas discovered, as would their successors in Vietnam one hundred or so

years in the future, that its ability to provide security for civilians did not extend beyond gunshot range of its outposts.

Part of the problem was that the mix of forces assigned to defend Texas was wrong. Twenty of the twenty-eight regular companies were infantry, and they were next to useless for repelling some of the world's most expert horsemen. A Texan asked the House of Representatives if members could "conceive of anything more absurd than starting in pursuit of the flying Comanche in a wagon drawn by mules?"[7] By the mid-1850s, the Comanches had long practice at evading frontier outposts and their infantry garrisons. The army's horsemen, eight companies of Dragoons and Mounted Rifles, were spread too thin to seriously annoy Indian raiders. In the spring of 1854, a resident of Laredo described the situation to Texas governor Elisha Pease: "I do not know how you can help us. The nine companies of infantry here have not twenty horses in their stables. The rifles [Mounted Rifles] are sixty miles off, and before we can send news to them of the depredations the Indians are gone beyond pursuit . . . the Indians stole last night all the loose horses grazing around the town, and left one dead, shot with arrows, within one hundred yards of the outside houses of the town—panic prevails."[8]

A typical petition to the governor from the inhabitants of Bexar County was a woeful list of stolen stock and murdered women and children: "It is worse than idle to say the Indians are not at war. If the action of regularly organized bands from the Lipan, Comanche, Waco and Tawakoni, robbing murdering and ravishing, and carrying into captivity women and children does not constitute a State of war, we are at a loss to define the meaning of war among barbarians."[9] Although about a fourth of the entire army was already in Texas, the three-thousand-odd soldiers were unequal to demands of fighting this war.

General Winfield Scott, commanding general of the army and one of the top-flight senior leaders the nation has ever pro-

Savage, persistent Indian attacks on the Texas frontier convinced Congress to expand the army. (*Harper's Weekly*, May 1, 1858)

duced, recognized these problems. He went before Congress in 1853 to explain why the army needed to be expanded. Congress denied his request. The following year Scott tried again. Testifying before a skeptical Congress, Scott reduced the issue to something the meanest understanding could grasp. Indian raids into Texas were more destructive than at any other place in the nation. Even when the soldiers were successful, casualties were too high. The loss rate was in inverse proportion to the strength of the unit involved: small units lost or won, but suffered dearly; larger units won and suffered fewer losses. Scott concluded that considerations both of policy (the treaty obligation to keep Indians from raiding Mexico) and of humanity dictated an expansion of the army "in order that adequate protection may be afforded

to our border inhabitants without a useless sacrifice of our brave detachments."[10]

As straightforward as Scott's logic may seem, at the time it fueled an acrimonious Senate debate. From the times of the Founding Fathers, most Americans had held a strong mistrust of a regular, or standing, army. American Revolutionary leaders had received classical educations complete with histories of Roman generals using their legions to undo the republic. Their fathers had family knowledge of Oliver Cromwell ordering his musketeers to expel the Long Parliament and of a subsequent Parliament declaring a Bill of Rights that charged King James II with subverting liberties by maintaining a standing army in time of peace. Consequently, they, too, believed that standing armies led to the despotism of military dictatorship. Most concluded that a democratic nation should instead depend upon its militia, citizen-soldiers summoned for duty in emergencies and then dismissed. At the end of the American Revolution, the public largely believed that a patriotic militia—sharpshooters all (though in fact they were anything but), possessing native field craft (a talent that most, except the southern frontiersmen, had long lost) and motivated by a sense of public virtue—had won freedom from the Crown. Thereafter, the justification for the existence of a regular army became a central part of the postwar political battle for control of the Revolution's legacy. Then politicians displayed their timeless ability to select the lessons they preferred from the historical record and argue their cases with great fervor.

In the 1850s many still viewed any proposed army expansion suspiciously. One of their spokesmen was Senator Sam Houston of Texas. Back in 1850 the army had added, at considerable expense, five thousand more soldiers to its roster, in large part to confront the Indians in Texas. But they had not added to the state's security. As one keen-eyed traveler who journeyed across Texas wrote, "Keeping a bull-dog to chase musquitoes

[*sic*] would be no greater nonsense than the stationing of six-pounders, bayonets, and dragoons for the pursuit of these red wolves."[11] Houston observed that in the days of the Texas Republic, the expenses of the Indian war did not exceed $10,000 and the people enjoyed better protection than they currently received with the presence of numerous regulars. Now the administration proposed raising even more expensive cavalry units, and Houston had no doubt that the increased costs would not yield improved security.

The opposition camp also included Senator Thomas Benton of Missouri. He did not care for the army and abused them loudly, calling them "schoolhouse officers and pothouse soldiers."[12] He doubted that President Franklin Pierce and Secretary of War Jefferson Davis truly intended the new regiments as relief for the frontier. More likely, he thundered, the object was to provide places for West Point graduates and assorted administration friends. In fact, as Benton considered the proposition, he conceived that the administration might be playing an even deeper game. Benton was far from a pacifist—he had been one of the architects of the conquest of Mexico—but he was very much a politician and he did not care for Pierce's brand of democrat. He warned that Pierce and Davis might want the expanded army for conquest, probably all the way to the shores of Cuba. However persuasive these senators' eloquence, few could ignore the overriding fact that the federal Indian policy in Texas was a failure on all counts.

Thirty-one senators resolved to try something new and agreed to expand the army. Twenty did not. The Pierce administration found a more sympathetic House. By a two-to-one majority it passed a bill to raise two new infantry and two new cavalry regiments.[13] Thus was born the Second Cavalry.

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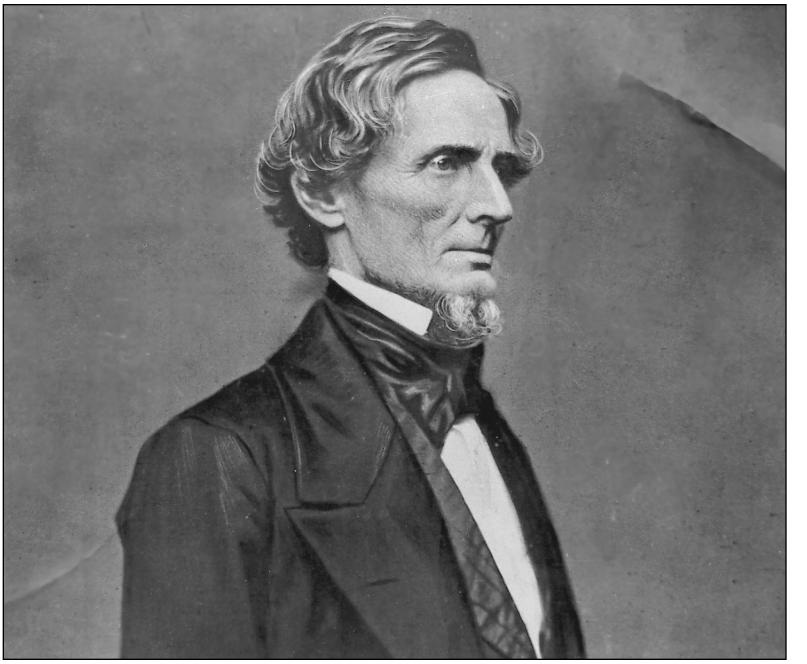

Secretary of War Jefferson Davis evaded the rules of seniority to select personally the officers to lead the newly raised Second Cavalry. (National Archives)

SECRETARY OF WAR DAVIS prided himself on his strict adherence to the letter of the law on issues both small and large. He interpreted the bill as giving him authority to raise and maintain the new cavalry regiments as a distinct arm of the service.[14] It may have been legal nitpicking, an activity the secretary greatly enjoyed, but it also meant that he could furnish the regiments with officers selected on the basis of merit rather than seniority. If a meritorious officer happened to be a friend of the secretary's, so much the better. But first and foremost, Davis preferred military professionals who had graduated from West Point.

During the years preceding the Civil War, the entrance exam at the U.S. Military Academy was far from the intellectual challenge it later became. By law, this exam could not include sub-

jects beyond the scope of work typically required in the nation's rural schools. A sound understanding of reading, writing, and arithmetic sufficed to pass it. Reputedly, U. S. Grant said that he never saw an algebra book until he arrived at West Point. The academy's academic course of study provided an education roughly equivalent to that of the nation's other top-notch educational institutions. It was heavy on daily recitations, whether the topic was moral philosophy or integral calculus.

In addition, cadets received military instruction that began with the basics. Classroom work in the Department of Tactics was rote learning, generally of the most numbing sort. During his first year, a cadet endured thirty-two hourlong recitations on the subject of the artillery, and fifteen apiece on infantry and cavalry. By the time he graduated, a student would have spent 540 hours reciting on the topic of the infantry. Under the supervision of the grand-sounding Department of Practical Military Engineering, a cadet spent his first year learning the duties of an ordinary private; his time from 4 P.M. until sunset was spent on the drill field. He then advanced to the duties of a corporal and participated in the "school of the company," a course designed to teach everything important about the drill and internal management of a small unit of soldiers. If the student survived to participate in the academy's more advanced classes, he received artillery instruction and learned the "school of the battalion," at that time a group half the size of a regiment. During the final year, the young man received some instruction in the science of war.

Overall, West Point emphasized French, mathematics, drawing, and engineering over the serious study of military history and leadership.[15]

Good conduct counted for much. A poor academic record, such as that earned by the man who would become the Second Cavalry's senior major, William Hardee, could partially be offset by meticulous attention to duties. In Fitzhugh Lee's case, a

"good seat" (a superior riding posture) propelled him to a first-place ranking in personal horsemanship and helped him overcome certain academic and conduct deficiencies. Whether Hardee's ability to shine spotlessly when inspected or Fitzhugh Lee's peerless seat would correlate with leadership in battle was problematic, but at least graduation from West Point demonstrated persistence, and on the Texas frontier that would count for a great deal.

Twenty of the thirty-four officers who received commissions in the Second Cavalry were West Point graduates. But military service attracted some men who lacked the wherewithal to attend West Point. To ascertain whether they were worthy to serve as officers in the two new cavalry regiments, Secretary Davis ordered the existing cavalry regiments to convene boards of examination. Here young officers were tested as to their fitness for duty with the new units. Since this procedure implied that an officer qualified to serve with the Dragoons and Mounted Rifles might not be suitable for the new units, it clearly delineated both the First and Second Cavalry as elites. Ten officers who were not West Point graduates but had distinguished themselves in the Mexican War entered the Second Cavalry after passing the exam. An additional handful of civilians demonstrated the necessary qualities. Twenty-four of the original thirty-four officers had seen combat prior to joining the Second Cavalry. Nineteen had served in the Mexican War, seven of whom held brevet rank for gallant and meritorious service during that war. By casting his net wide, Davis was able to select men he perceived possessed surpassing qualities. With one notable exception, events would vindicate his choices.

By the end of March Davis had made most of his selections. Not everyone could or did accept his appointment. Irish-born John Williams had managed that rare feat of rising from the ranks of the Mounted Rifles. He passed the board of examina-

tion, received an assignment to the Second Cavalry as a second lieutenant, and was killed before joining the regiment. When William Emory declined his appointment as the regiment's junior major, a Captain Braxton Bragg received it instead. But Bragg had decided he was going to resign from the army. Consequently, he too declined. Bragg recommended that another officer in his artillery regiment receive the appointment, in spite of the fact that this man was the unit's most junior captain. Because of Bragg's endorsement, Davis's insistence on merit over seniority, and the fact that the captain possessed the two prime qualifications for service in the new regiment, by being both a competent West Point graduate and southern born, George H. Thomas secured a fabulous opportunity. In one of the many ironies of service in the antebellum army, eight years later Bragg and Thomas would be confronting each other as opposing army commanders in Tennessee.

The offer found Thomas on garrison duty at one of the army's least favored posts, Fort Yuma, Arizona Territory. Fort Yuma lay in a bottomland that seemed to concentrate the heat. Daytime temperatures in the shade reached 116 degrees. In later years Thomas would regale his subordinates with a story about a notoriously bad man who died at Fort Yuma. His behavior had been such that no one doubted where he went after his death. One night shortly after his funeral he entered the squad room looking as he did in life. A comrade called out, "Bill, what do you want?" Bill replied, "Boys, I have been to h—l and came near freezing to death, so I just asked the 'boss' for a pass for an hour to enable me to come here for my blankets."[16] The decision to escape Fort Yuma's excessive heat was not difficult for Thomas.

The man designated to command the regiment was already in Texas. There, Major Albert Sidney Johnston had been serving as army paymaster since 1849. It was anything but a distin-

guished position for a man whom Zach Taylor had once called "the best soldier he had ever commanded."[17] Poverty had compelled Johnston to accept the paymaster assignment, and he loathed it. Six times a year he rode a 620-mile circuit from fort to fort along the Texas frontier to deliver money to the troops. He slept on the ground, exposed to alternate cycles of heat and cold, ate poorly, and grew worn and thin. It was a cycle of unrelenting drudgery. Each time he returned to his family in Austin, his wife observed deeper signs of hard usage. She doubted he could endure.

But Johnston possessed some solid political connections through two relatives, one a congressman and the other a senator. Johnston's sister skillfully used her position as Congressman William Preston's wife to campaign on the major's behalf. She besieged General Scott with charm and skill—her influence was worth that of two or three senators, noted one observer—and wrote "pretty" letters to the secretary of war pressing Johnston's claim to promotion.[18] The Texas legislature knew and liked Johnston, and its members also threw their support behind him. Best of all, Secretary of War Davis had been Johnston's friend and admirer ever since Johnston's quick-thinking reaction to a dangerous confrontation during the Mexican War had probably saved Davis's life.

While Davis and Johnston were entering Monterrey to complete the negotiation of capitulation terms with the garrison, a mob of angry Mexican soldiers had surrounded them. With scores of muskets leveled at them from the rooftops and several cannon pointed at them from behind nearby barricades, Johnston coolly assessed the situation. He recognized a Mexican staff officer who was trying to slink off and let the mob complete its work. With Davis at his side he boldly rode up to the officer to demand an escort to Mexican army headquarters. Johnston made it quite clear what he would do if the officer declined. The

implied threat succeeded and Johnston's newest best friend led them to safety. Johnston's quick perception and decisive action cemented Davis's esteem.

The only other serious candidate for the colonelcy was an enterprising Texas Ranger named Benjamin McCulloch. Like Johnston, McCulloch had influential friends. But he had never attended West Point, and this helped tip the balance in Johnston's favor. McCulloch instead received an appointment as a major in the First Cavalry. It was a high compliment. He was the only field officer selected from civilian life. The prideful McCulloch, smarting under the defeat for higher office, declined. Before his death while leading a Confederate brigade at Pea Ridge, McCulloch would acknowledge that the War Department had acted wisely when it chose Johnston ahead of him. So in 1855 Sidney Johnston, the former frontier paymaster, received a promotion to colonel and command of the Second Cavalry. Political influence helped others as well to receive posting to the new regiment. Pennsylvania-born Cornelius Van Camp enjoyed the patronage of Congressman Thaddeus Stevens. It allowed the young man to gain the coveted step to second lieutenant. For Colonel Johnston the promotion brought renown and some glory. For Van Camp it brought something distinctly different.

Sixteen of the officers who accepted appointments to the Second Cavalry became generals in the Civil War. Of the eleven who served in the Confederate Army, four became full generals, thus supplying one-half of the Confederacy's eight officers who attained that rank. Secretary of War Davis had succeeded in his aim of selecting officers who were the best to be found in the army and in civilian life. Because of his effort, and because of the subsequent prominent careers in the Confederate Army of so many of them, the Second Cavalry became known as "Jeff Davis's Own."